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CAN THE WORLD BE FED? PERSPECTIVE 1985

Summary

The Ford and Rockefeller Foundations recently invited a group of 30 agricultural experts from three nations (US, Canada, and Australia), with working experiences in many more, to participate in a seminar on World Food Perspectives. This report summarizes the views expressed at the seminar.

The participants agreed that knowledge and farm practices presently available could support a large further increase in food production in both developed countries (DCs) and less developed countries (LDCs). But the problems to be overcome in realizing this increase are substantial, and their consideration led to much discussion.

Five basic assumptions underlaid all projections: (1) normal weather; (2) no land-use restrictions; (3) favorable price incentives; (4) adequate supplies of production inputs; and (5) continuing research and education to maintain yield increases. The experts' estimates of capacities for expansion ranged from 30 to 50 percent into the early 1980s.

The discussion brought out that attainment of such an expansion would require very substantial capital investments in the agricultural and agri-business sectors in the developed countries. Also, the projections assumed that petroleum and fertilizer supplies would be available, at higher prices but with cost/benefit ratios still favorable to farm products.

For the LDCs, capital investments also are important, with emphasis on public investments and water control programs. Much pessimism was expressed because: (1) cost-

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price ratios in LDCs have improved less than in DCs (with exceptions); (2) fertilizer supplies to LDCs have been reduced substantially and their prices have increased dramatically; and (3) the programs to create and communicate new technology have a spotty success pattern among LDCs. Recent price changes and input shortages discourage the use of modern technology, despite the clear evidence that this is the only available means of attaining the higher yields which are essential if LDC food production capacity is to be increased.

Despite these needs, several participants expressed the view that the World Food Conference, to be convened this coming November, will fail to accomplish any significant purpose. The ensuing discussion identified a number of possible (and partially conflicting) purposes. The consensus was that a successful World Food Conference will require much careful preparatory work, along with much international agreement before the Conference convenes, and should focus on certain enduring problems.

Possible strategies for an international grain reserve, the seminar's final topic, might include limiting access to the reserve to nations that cooperate in furnishing full information on production, consumption, and domestic inventories, along with suitable financial contributions to the cost of maintaining such a reserve. The strategy would also require the building of government inventories in surplus years to be drawn on in years of deficits, leaving privately held stocks to meet shorter term demand/supply fluctuations. The LDCs, at least those with limited financial resources, could participate on a less stringent basis, provided that they supplied full information for adequate grain reserve operational planning.

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